THE ANCIENT WORLD IN MINIATURE: FLAT GERMAN TIN FIGURES OF THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

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Abstract.-

Flat German tin figures were made from the later 18th century as children's toys and educational tools, themes being chosen from up to date classical scholarship. Subjects such as famous Greek and Roman battles, the latter often against Germans, reveal the interests of the educated classes. The First World War put an end to mass production and tin figures became models for adult collectors. These customers influenced the themes, among them detailed representations of scenes from the ancient world. Some of these, e.g. the judgement of Paris, were simply an excuse to depict nudity, others such as Pheidias' workshop reflect scholarly interests in ancient sculpture. Tin figures illustrate the development of 20th century scholarship and also show gaps in the knowledge.

Zusammenfassung.-

Flache deutsche Zinnfiguren wurden seit dem 18. Jahrhundert als Spielfiguren und zur Kindererziehung hergestellt. Die Thematik entstammte den Altertumswissenschaften und schloß etwa berühmte griechische und römische Schlachten (besonders gegen Germanen) ein. Der erste Weltkrieg bedeutete das Ende der Massenproduktion. Zinnfiguren wurden Sammlerobjekte für Erwachsene, welche die Thematik beeinflußten. Darstellungen aus dem Umfeld der Antike wie etwa das Parisurteil waren ein Vorwand für die Darstellung von Nacktheit, während Themen wie die Werkstatt des Pheidias das Interesse an antiker Skulptur aufzeigen. Zinnfiguren illustrieren die Entwicklung der Altertumswissenschaften im 20. Jahrhundert und zeigen Lücken im Wissen auf.

Key words: Tin figures.
Schlüsselbegriffe: Zinnfiguren.

PRODUCTION.

Flat tin figures were a largely German phenomenon, although they were widely exported. To the uninitiated, these toys look decidedly odd because they are as flat as cardboard cut-outs. The subject was decided by the owner of a workshop. He commissioned a draughtsman who would make a drawing which could be converted

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into a mould. The draughtsman normally chose widely available pictures for his models which he normally found in recently published books, journals such as the *London Illustrated News*, and printed picture albums[1]. The drawings were handed to a skilled engraver who transferred them onto two thin slabs of slate; one for the front and one for the reverse of the figure. He also added channels which guided the molten tin into the mould, and thin grooves that allowed the air displaced by the tin to escape. In the workshop, molten tin was poured into the mould. The resulting casts, called 'blanks', were given to women and children who panted the figures at home for minimal wages. The finished products were sold in toy shops.

Tin figures were made in different sizes, the most common is a figure measuring 30 mm from the soles of the feet to the top of the head. Because they are flat, only a small amount of metal was required, which kept production costs down. Painted tin figures were therefore cheaper than contemporary figures carved from wood, but remained were still so expensive that only the upper and upper middle classes could afford them.

ORIGINS.

From the beginning tin figures were conceived as toys. While often traced back to Roman times by enthusiasts, flat tin-figures probably evolved from medieval (13th century) pendants representing saints – among them St. George on horseback - , which were sold to pilgrims at numerous shrines as souvenirs, and from small scenes – knights fighting, dancing couples, and even castles – affixed to garments. It required little ingenuity to add a small footplate to these figures to turn them into toys.

Until the 18th century, only kings could afford metal model soldiers. Lois XIV had an army of silver soldiers, and William I of Orange ordered tin models of the legions of Scipio and Marius when he reorganised his army[2].

From the late 18th century, the makers of pewter utensils such as mugs, plates and candlesticks lost customers to the producers of porcelain and earthenware goods. Therefore, they had to find other markets and added toy figures to their repertoire.

THE LATE 18TH AND EARLY 19TH CENTURIES.

While we think primarily of soldiers when tin figures are mentioned, military figures were only part of the output of workshops. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the nature of toys and the lives of children were quite different from today. Children of the better off were supervised by governesses and tutors and play time was often learning time. The enlightenment led to a new interest in children and their

[1] Kaiser, P., *Zinnfiguren, Wissenswertes zu Geschichte, Herstellung und Verwendung*, Erfurt 1985, 10; Schwarz, H. *et al.*, *Paradestücke, Zinnfiguren aus Nürnberg und Fürth, Schriften des Spielzeugmuseums Nürnberg* IV, Nürnberg 2000.

education. Therefore, manufacturers offered a wide range of educational groups, among them portrait figures of kings, the inhabitants of faraway countries, hunting scenes, acrobats, and animals. While early figures were often rather plain, a number of workshops offered superbly detailed figurines taken from recent scholarly publications. A wonderful group of monkeys produced by Johann Hilpert in Nürnberg in 1780 is an excellent example. The models for these monkeys were published in 1775 by the natural historian professor Johann Christian Daniel von Schreiber in *Die Saugethiere*[3]. The figures are finely detailed, and the engraver even added the creatures' Latin names to their footplates.

Among the early figures (fig. 1), there are only a few scenes taken from antiquity. Amongst these is a group of Roman gods produced by Johann Ernst Fischer in Halle around 1810[4]. These figures were part of an ambitious educational project: in conjunction with the publisher F. Dreyßig, Fischer commissioned scholars at the University of Halle to write small booklets on a range of subjects. These were printed by Dreyßig and packaged with specially made tin figures. The series was sold in bookshops in Halle and later also in other German cities as *Geschenk an die Jugend*, "Present for children". One of the issues, published around 1810, dealt with classical mythology, the author was Christian Buhle, professor for natural history at the university, director of a local grammar school, and member of the societies for hunting and forestry, and economy. His booklet was accompanied by twelve tin figures of ancient gods.

The archetypes for these figurines are difficult to trace. Some appear to be based on ancient models, some on post-antique works of art, some on contemporary ideas gleaned from literary sources, rather than ancient objects, and others seem to be inventions. Thus the figures provide a glimpse of the knowledge of a group of highly educated individuals at the beginning of the 19th century. Fischer's Artemis is clearly influenced by the immensely popular Hellenistic Artemis in the Louvre, which had been presented by Pope Paul IV to Henri II in 1556 and was moved to the Hall of Antiquities in the Louvre in 1602. A hunting dog has replaced the deer.

Fischer also made a Hephaistos or Vulcan (fig. 2) making a rather modern looking helmet. This figure may have been inspired by Roman coins, many of which show the subject. The illustration shows a bronze coin made in the reign of Antoninus Pius in Nicomedia in Bithynia.

We can recognise a bearded Asklepios-like figure standing at a tree trunk, around which a snake is coiled. However he holds a scythe, a decidedly non-ancient attribute. Askleipios occurs on numerous coins, gems, and there are statues in Rome and Athens.

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[2] Kaiser, *Zinnfiguren*..., 8.

[3] Schwarz, H. *et al.*, *Paradestücke*…, 39.

[4] Schwarz, H. *et al.*, *Paradestücke*…, 13.

A charming Dionysos/Bacchus lifts a golden phiale, his modesty is covered by a whole bushel of leaves. His white skin may indicate his rather effeminate nature, or could reflect the colour of the model for this figure, Michelangelo's Bacchus.

A man wearing a blindfold and resting his right arm on an urn is probably meant to be Homer, but his dress is at best late Roman, and the book on the shelf on his left hand side is clearly modern.

Fischer's figures were of an exceptionally high quality which was matched by only a few other producers. The popularity of tin figures in Germany and other European countries led to a steady increase in production and stiff competition, leading to a decline in the quality of figures over the next 40 years or so. While the Napoleonic Wars, which affected all of Europe, had hardly any influence on the choice of themes, the Crimean War changed the industry completely. It coincided roughly with the beginning of Historicism, which established the study of modern history as a fully fledged and important subject. With the Crimean War, tin figures ceased to represent a wide variety of themes and became tin soldiers. The combatants of every single battle were issued as quickly as possible by all German factories – there were more than 60 in Nürnberg and Fürth alone, which tried to represent all the minutiae of war including baggage trains and field hospitals. From then on, tin soldiers were almost as up to date as contemporary newspapers and every single war – however small or distant – could be re-enacted in nurseries in the whole of Europe. Tin soldiers now served a new educational purpose: they were intended to prepare German boys for their future roles as soldiers. Due attention was also given to past conflicts, which aspiring officers would later study at military academies, and the makers of tin soldiers issued impressive series representing Greek and Roman wars. The choice of subjects taken from antiquity was somewhat limited. The ancient Greeks were represented fighting each other and Persians, and there were numerous groups with Alexander the Great, including his Indian campaign (fig. 3). The slide shows an Indian elephant issued by Heinrichsen in the 1880s. Boys could even command the Greek and Persian fleets at Salamis.

The classical education of children was not completely neglected: one of the best known workshops, Heinrichsen in Nürnberg, issued figures and a game containing the great heroes of the Trojan wars in the 1880s, including gods and amazons. The figures were largely based on late 19th century paintings and illustrations, but Artemis is the Artemis in the Louvre, now correctly depicted with a deer, not a dog. An unusual group shows amazons, which were also sold as Greek cavalry, fording a river (fig. 4).

Figures representing Roman subjects show a predilection for schoolboy favourites: the Punic wars, fights with Germans throughout the whole period, and Caesar's wars. The favourite was the German folk hero Herman the Cheruscan. Heinrichsen supplied, for example, a group depicting the suicide of Qinctilius Varus in the swamps of Germany (fig. 5). The firm also made a siege of Syracuse with

beautifully detailed siege engines (fig. 6). Most of these are based on scholarly reconstructions of the time, and not on extant ancient depictions, although designers of the figures could now use a wealth of ancient sources. The covered ram is based on a design by Schramm, and the catapults are taken from Kromayer and Veith. However, many Roman soldiers were at least influenced by the legionnaires on the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, and a siege tower made in 1889 may have been inspired by one of the friezes of the triumphal arch of Septimius Severus. The immense output of the workshops, which amounted to several million figures, led to the use of stock types, and German tribesmen could be reborn as Afghan hills men or other native fighters.

The 20th century.

The First World War brought an abrupt end to the boom. Even before the slaughter in the trenches led to a disillusionment with all things military, the field-grey uniforms proved to be less appealing to children than their colourful predecessors, and the makers of tin soldiers found it increasingly difficult to procure lead and tin, since all metals were urgently needed for the war effort.

By 1920, most manufacturers of tin soldiers had ceased to exist, but the handful of surviving ones were saved by an entirely new phenomenon: the adult collector. He – collectors of tin figures are almost always male – changed the nature of tin figures drastically. Hitherto, all figures had been supplied ready painted, and were of low quality to enable Napoleonic soldiers and others to serve in a multitude of armies and in many periods. The new type of customer demanded figures of the highest quality, and expected to paint the figures himself and to the highest standard of accuracy. Thus tin-figures vividly illustrate the progress of scholarship at the time and even show which sources were used. From now on, all aspects of antiquity were covered reflecting the interests of private individuals. Figures represent the history of antiquarianism: Napoleon's discoveries in Egypt, the display of the famous and immensely popular Apollo of Belvedere, Greek daily life, works of art, here the Aphrodite of Knidos, and reconstructions of historical scenes such as the death of Caesar and Brennus placing his sword on the scales weighing Rome's ransom. A number of groups were designed and commissioned by scholars with particular historical interests. , his bridge across the Rhine, and the capture of Valerian by King Shapur.

Since men were involved, there is also a large amount of nudity, which was acceptable when shown in a historical context. The slide shows Odysseus surprising Nausicaa and her companions, and athletes competing in the Olympic games.

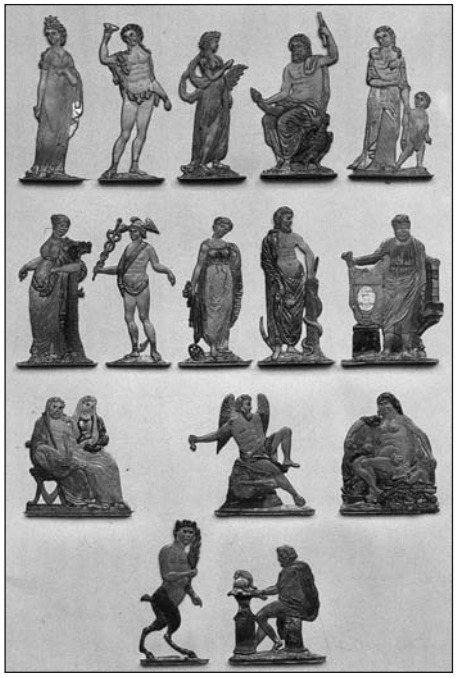

Fig. 1. Johann Ernst Fischer, Roman Gods, Halle, Museum.

Fig. 2. Vulcan, Johann Ernst Fischer, Halle, Museum.

Fig. 3. Greek War-Elephant, Heinrichsen, Nürnberg.

Fig. 4. Amazons fording a river. Heinrichsen, Nürnberg.

Fig. 5. Suicide of Varus, Heinrichsen, Nürnberg.

Fig. 6. Siege Tower, Heinrichsen, Nürnberg.